

NARRATIVE: MY EXPERIENCES WITH DIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

I was born on the 15 July 1964 in Clairwood, south of Durban. My family relocated to Chatsworth, an 'Indian township' when I was 2 years old. I spent the following 26 years in Chatsworth, completing my Basic and University Education (undergraduate and B.Ed. Hons degrees) and commencing my teaching career. I married and re-located to Queensburgh where I continued to teach and also completed two more postgraduate degrees on a part-time basis. I then moved to Zululand wherein I am currently employed as a lecturer.

This narrative is going to chronicle my story of being a learner to my current employment, with the *foci* being on critical moments in my life that influenced my development and encounters with people who are considered different from me. This narrative is presented in 6 sections. The first section is the introduction which gives an overview of my life; the second section presents key incidents in my Basic Education; the third section surveys my university experiences as an undergraduate student; the fourth section discusses my teaching experiences; the fifth section explicates my employment as a lecturer at a university and the sixth section concludes the narrative.

EARLY YEARS: BASIC EDUCATION

I lived in a very vibrant township that embodied a strong community spirit and a social cohesion that grew organically. This juxtaposed the intentions of the apartheid government to herd us like cattle into a limited space.

I was first made aware of the socio-economic chasm amongst my peers when my teachers at primary school would ask the learners who were receiving a state grant to raise their hands. These learners would look visibly embarrassed. I recall thinking that this information could have been elicited in a discreet manner. This incident shaped my outlook and I am always conscious of the socio-economic status of students. I later taught in a poor community and I was very cognisant of not placing additional financial burdens on students by asking them to purchase

materials for projects as I did not want to deprive their families of a loaf of bread. Hence, I made all endeavours to improvise with materials that were freely available without compromising the quality of the projects.

Religious diversity was overt both in my community and in the schools. Religion was never seen as divisive but rather something to be celebrated. I was always excited when any religious festival approached as it was embraced with equal intensity in both the community and at school. My teachers, irrespective of their own religious denominations, would devote many lessons narrating stories and detailing the significance of the upcoming festival. This gave me insight into all religions and enabled me to appreciate every religion. In the community, all festivals were celebrated with great aplomb as we enjoyed days off from school and exchanged parcels of goodies and even gifts. This formed the bedrock of my approach to religious diversity - when one acknowledges all beliefs, then religion becomes a unifying force. In my own classes when I teach literature that has religious content, I make a point of discussing the religion in the text, drawing on similarities and differences with other religious beliefs and ensuring that the discussion is all inclusive.

My introduction to race diversity at school emanated from the history lessons. I was very fortunate to have teachers who were able to teach over and above the prescribed textbook. An illustrative example is that when we were taught the *Battle of the Blood River* my history teacher would challenge the so called factual account and discuss white domination, the theft of the land and the grabbing of resources by the whites. This instilled in me the imperative that I must always interrogate a text and its purpose. It was the courageous efforts of these teachers which directed me to become a teacher, knowing that teachers can shape society in a positive way.

These illuminations drove me to question why people in my community respected white people although they have a heinous history in South Africa. A case in point was when members of the community offered juice to the white person who drove the municipal van and who relaxed in the shade whilst the black labourers toiled in the hot sun. I was stung by the social injustice and always asked my mother to offer juice to the Black workers. My exposure to Black people in the community was only in a slanted power dialectic – they were the workers and we were the employers. It was the first time I encountered the nefarious pass system when I witnessed what was then called ‘Black Jacks’, who were in essence white men hired to arrest Black workers if they were not in possession of a pass. The cruelty of such inhumane practices made me very cognisant of injustices by the apartheid state.

A further example of diversity in school pertains to a learner who stood out in the learner population at Primary School because he was different in his mental outlook. Children did not understand him but that did not deter them from crafting different theories. I hated the fact that the children mocked him. Whenever teachers did not have anything planned for assembly they would call him to speak on his favourite subject – the planets. He would talk continuously without any preparation until the teachers guided him off the stage with the promise that he could continue speaking the following day. I was really enthralled by his extensive knowledge during the era when knowledge was not so easily available. I realised the strength in diversity and the necessity to acknowledge people who were different in a positive way.

At secondary school I shall never forget an incident involving a student teacher who was being evaluated by a lecturer from the University of Durban-Westville (UDW). This was during the height of apartheid and the student teacher was discussing the upcoming national elections. The lecturer halted the lesson and asked to speak to the teacher in private. We were told by the student teacher that the lecturer felt that we should not be taught this content. I recall being so

furious that an academic could have such archaic views. It acted as an impetus to me, reinforcing my desire to train as a teacher so that I will never be silent on knowledge that I deem to be important.

UNIVERSITY

I enrolled at UDW to do a teaching degree, specialising in History and English. The diversity pool was now somewhat extended. Although all the students were still of Indian origin, I now had exposure to lecturers of different races. Whilst I had very bad experiences with the lecturers from the Department of Afrikaans who were overtly racist, my experiences with lecturers from the Department of English was a positive one. That led me to conclude that there was diversity within diversity.

The English literary texts that were selected for study went against the grain of the types of texts that were considered appropriate in apartheid South Africa. One of the lecturers that stood out for me was a lesbian, who was very open about her sexual orientation at a time when most people were intolerant. It was my first encounter with someone of a sexual orientation that was outside of the standard norm. She was fearless and exciting in her teaching approach and I knew that this was the type of teacher that I wanted to be. I still believe that those who studied English at UDW in the 1980s were really fortunate to engage with a curriculum and teaching staff that was so subversive during the dark era of apartheid. Therefore, even in my current employment, I am taken aback by some of the conservative views of some colleagues who have such rigid views on what construes right and wrong.

TEACHING AND POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

My biggest exposure to diversity was in the early 1990s when schools opened its doors to all races. There was an influx of Black students and it was an exciting and challenging time for me as I had never before taught English to students for whom English was a second language. It was also a culturally enriching experience as I gradually learnt about Black culture such as when one is addressing a student and discovers that he or she looks down, one must not view it a marker of arrogance but rather respect for one's elders.

My interest in English Studies, especially after being exposed to fresh challenges, served as a catalyst for me to enrol for a BA (Hons) degree and later a Master's degree in English. I attained the former *cum laude* and the latter with an 82% aggregate, complemented by numerous merit certificates. This was achieved despite a giant generational gap between the other students and me and their advantage of being full-time students.

EMPLOYMENT AS A LECTURER

In 2006 I took up a position as a lecturer at the University of Zululand. The university is a melting pot of diversity. In this eclectic, diverse environment the types of diversity are not exhaustive as I meet students and lecturers of different cultures, socio-economic status, academic backgrounds, generational phases, national and international locality, rural and urban environments and linguistic diversity amongst others.

This diversity is like chicken soup to a lecturer of English as I use this diversity to enhance my lessons. A case in point is when we examine different literary genres and I explore issues of diversity from the students' lived experiences, for example, patriarchy from diverse perspectives in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* by C.N. Adichie.

CONCLUSION

I am fortunate to have encountered multiple diversities and I firmly believe that it has shaped my character and outlook on life. Much of the knowledge I have acquired cannot be found on Google search or in a textbook but in my daily interactions with diverse elements and people. I feel my inner growth most intensely when I meet my colleagues from my previous employment and I realise that many have very archaic views on issues whilst I have developed and understand diversity which gives me a more informed perspective on life.